

EARTH TEAM VOLUNTEERS BRING SMILES TO HURRICANE VICTIMS

In Mississippi date reference is made as either before Katrina or after Katrina. Before Katrina, libraries along the gulf coast celebrated the Christmas season by having children's programs. Children would come and celebrate by singing, snacking, stories being read, decorating and other festive activities. In Hancock and Harrison counties, along the coast of Mississippi, there was only one library that was not completely destroyed.

Earth Team Volunteers from the Jackson Field Office in Jackson, Mississippi were in contact with NRCS and local district offices on the coast inquiring what else could be done besides the clean-up efforts. Cherie Schadler, a strong supporter of conservation and involved with NRCS and her local conservation district, has put her job on hold and has devoted herself full time in the recovery efforts. Cherie wanted to make sure the children of coastal counties of Mississippi still had Christmas.....BUT she needed help. That's when the Earth Team Volunteers stepped up to the plate and hit a grand slam!

Earth Team volunteers brought new blankets, gloves, socks and undergarments to the Jackson Field Office. Some collected money from their communities, churches and other organizations to purchase gift and phone cards. In addition to the items collected they agreed to make dozens of homemade cookies for the children who would attend "Christmas in Kiln" at the only library left in the county, which was in Kiln, MS. This would be an extra special treat since most of the hurricane victims were still living in tents. Women as well as men Earth Team Volunteers heated up their ovens and brought hundreds of cookies to the Jackson Field Office. The office was full of blankets, pillows, clothing and the sweet smell of homemade cookies the week before Christmas. On December 17th, 18 Earth Team members were at the office before 6:00 a.m. for the three hour drive to the coast. Since there were no other children's programs scheduled anticipation mounted that there might be over 200 children. The event had to be moved from the damaged library to an open-sided arena. The spirit of the season flowed as Santa came in on a fire truck and carolers were singing. Earth Team members helped children visit Santa, handed toys out, wrapped presents that the children could "shop" for to give to their parents, served cookies and hotdogs, gave boxes of personal items to individuals, organized and distributed blankets to families and gloves, coats, socks to the children. Instead of the 200 children the number of children who came to "Christmas in the Kiln" was between 400 and 500!!!

Dozens of Earth Team members from the Jackson Field Office helped to cook and gathered items; even if they couldn't travel to the coast. For the 18 Earth Team members who participated in the 16 hour day; it was a blessing. The smiles from the children and the expression of appreciation from the adults were overwhelming. One will never forget when a teenage boy came up to an Earth

Team Volunteer and asked “Mam’ you don’t happen to have a stick of deodorant available do you?” or the elderly women whose face lit up when handed a sack containing shampoo and other personnel items. After standing in food lines and eating in massive tents the homemade cookies were a special treat. Adults and children asked “you mean you brought homemade cookies, may we have one? Oh, thank you!”

It was an Earth Team event that will never be forgotten by Earth Team members of the Jackson Field Office or those children who were able to forget about their problems from Hurricane Katrina for a day. Earth Team members wore festive Earth Team name tags provided by the NRCS State Office. When someone inquired what the Earth Team was about a volunteer stated “Let me tell you about the Earth Team.....”

The philosophy of NRCS in Mississippi is “Helping People Help The Land”. Land devastated by Hurricane Katrina will take time to heal; but before we heal the land the Earth Team Volunteers were healing the spirits of the people; especially the children.

Submitted by Lynn Porter, Earth Team Coordinator, NRCS Jackson Field Office, Jackson, Mississippi Rogerick Thompson, District Conservationist



Little Girl with box of toys



Jackson Field Office Earth Team Volunteers